

Inquiries into Horror and Fantasy through the Works of Stephen King

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by

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Abstract

Humans have been fascinated with horror stories since the beginning of time. The things that shock and scare us are often the things that we are able to recall with the most clarity. Many supernatural horror stories are as well-developed and poignant as other fantasy tales. One of horror's most powerful and relevant authors, Stephen King, writes such tales. In this thesis, I analyze fantasy and horror, explaining how horror falls under the umbrella of fantasy literature, and I further explore its cultural significance and appeal. I then examine King's first three published works, *Carrie* (1974), *Salem's Lot* (1975), and *The Shining* (1977), emphasizing their complex themes. Through this analysis, I demonstrate that Stephen King is a skilled author and that his works have meaning beyond their horrific elements.

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Inquiries into Horror and Fantasy through the Works of Stephen King

In the introduction to a 2007 edition of *The Shining*, Stephen King wrote, “Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.” It has long been my belief that the monsters in our hearts are the most important reason people love horror. This is why we read it, write it, watch it, and talk about it with our friends. Because sometimes life has a way of being dark and ruthless, we sometimes wonder at the nature of evil.

King has been called a “master of horror” due to his continued success with his unique novels. *The Shining*, *Pet Sematary*, *Cujo*, and *It* are just some of the stories from King’s brilliant mind that have captured audiences on the big screen as well as in novels. His success is undeniable and his name and works have become ubiquitous in pop culture. This widespread success has led some to consider his fiction too mainstream and uncultured to be taken seriously, yet critical analysis of his works shows otherwise.

Stephen King is a masterful creator of horror, but his appeal goes beyond the scares. Horror stories, at their core, are fantasy stories. They are stories of danger, including elements of the supernatural mixed with human emotions that audiences can relate to. King is a talented author, like any other author who is able to touch our lives with interesting stories and well-developed characters. His stories travel to very dark places and include the violence and mayhem that simultaneously fascinate and terrify us. This paper aims to prove that stories about horror are fantasy stories, and very relevant to our lives. I will explore the significance of horror stories, and therefore the significance of Stephen King, by highlighting some of his greatest horror novels and examining their themes.

To begin explaining horror, one must explain fantasy. There is no better place to start exploring fantasy than with an expert on fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien believed stories must contain specific elements in order to be considered “fairy-stories.” His famous essay “On Fairy Stories” offers critical analysis of the genre he loved. While writing his classic works *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien developed the magical realm of Middle Earth and his own views on how fantasy should be made. He argued that fantasy stories must contain magic, though he made sure to clarify that the magic required of “faerie stories” did not have to include actual faeries or elves. He wrote:

The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is [...] to hold communion with other living things. A story may thus deal with the satisfaction of these desires, with or without the operation of either machine or magic, and in proportion as it succeeds it will approach the quality and have the flavour of fairy-story.

To Tolkien, there was no single definition of what made a story a fantasy, but it had a mood or feeling of magic. The “faerie” or, as Tolkien prefers, “enchantment” created by the author must be believable to the reader. He emphasized that “It is essential to a genuine fairy-story, [...] that it should be presented as ‘true.’” For example, he did not consider *Gulliver’s Travels* or Lewis Carroll’s Alice stories fairy-stories. A fairy-story “cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is figment or illusion.”

The guidelines for “faerie” Tolkien presents in his essay are strict at times. In the high-fantasy world of Middle Earth, the obvious magic and enchantment are essential in Tolkien’s own fairy-story. Horror stories often present secondary worlds that contain elements of faerie, arguably approaching the “flavour of fairy-story” Tolkien desired. The monsters of horror stories are sometimes fantastic beings – vampires, werewolves, or humans with some supernatural power. These elements of “faerie” can also be presented more subtly. Features of a world that appears exactly like our own may be slightly skewed or even bizarre, making it more fantasy than reality. Horror stories with elements of “faerie” make up an important part of the fantasy genre and fulfill other requirements of Tolkien’s in interesting ways.

In “On Fairy Stories” Tolkien also addresses “recovery,” “escape,” and “consolation” in fairy tales. “Recovery[...] is a regaining – regaining of a clear view.” Recovery related to fairy stories involves pulling back from the fantasy world a person enters when reading a story and reentering the real world (or, as Tolkien refers to it, the “Primary World”) with a new sense of clarity. Although fantasy stories take place in worlds and situations unlike those we experience day-to-day, a reader can gain new perspective on life from fantasy stories. Pieces of a fantasy world can correspond to the real world and allow readers to imagine their lives as similar to lives of fictional characters. Tolkien believes that “[f]airy stories deal largely [...] with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting.” Offering a recovered perspective on life based on fantasy stories is one of the genre’s most amazing qualities. In times of hardship, obstacles in one’s life can be thought of as dragons to be slain. When we are trying to achieve something against the odds, it is comforting to recall when a character beat all odds through hard work and talent. Recovery

sometimes offers ways to change and improve our attitude towards a situation with the recovered clarity we gain from reading fantasy stories.

In horror stories, recovery takes on an extra quality, relief. Horror often puts our problems into perspective as the stories show how truly and horribly something can go wrong. The grim sequences in horror stories can depict nightmares worse than we could normally imagine. Recovering perspective from those images helps not only to dwarf our own problems but also to offer enormous relief regarding our own personal safety. We regain a feeling of calm when we exit a horror story and realize that we are no longer in danger.

In most fantasy stories, there is an evil that must be fought. In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels, a young boy must face the most powerful dark wizard of all time. Tolkien's own *Lord of the Rings* puts small beings, hobbits, up against an ancient evil force that can breed its own armies. Similarly, *Star Wars* is a story of corruption and, ultimately, all hope rests on one last Jedi, Luke Skywalker, to destroy an oppressive empire. These heroes overcome the odds and their power allows them to triumph. Aided by friends, they achieve their goals. The frightening and evil elements in these stories also help us as readers to experience recovery. We can identify traits these heroes share with us or parts of the corrupt evil that mirror our own corrupt world. The return to reality here may also offer a small bit of relief that we, in our present circumstances, are safe. We can be thankful for physical or psychological safety after reading a horror novel, because characters in the stories may experience both types of stress.

This relief is magnified when it comes to horror. The demons in horror stories are often unrelenting and occasionally undefeatable. Our hero may be driven in his quest to conquer the

evil not by his own innate goodness or a prophecy, but by his own fear. Evil can appear with no explanation or purpose and haunt without mercy. Such evil frightens and fascinates the reader. During recovery, the fright abates and we are left looking with wonder at the grim Secondary World. Contemplating these evils after the fact and seeing the “truth” in the story are part of Tolkien’s recovery. In fairy-stories, a reader can “[see] things as we are (or were) meant to see them’ – as things apart from ourselves.” By reading a horror story, readers may discover something about how they deal with fear. We might also wonder what kind of courage we would display in a disaster. Horror, like other fantasy, makes us examine our values. What do we like about the hero? What do we deplore about the evil? In horror, as the evil worsens and the hero exposes more of her true self (the self she resorts to when experiencing pain or panic), we are able to contemplate these values further. To what lengths will a human being go to survive? What will she do to protect her family or herself? Horror stories offer morbid and fantastic situations that address these questions and provide the opportunity for readers to address them.

The relief accompanied by the regaining of clarity in “recovery” depends on another requirement of Tolkien’s, escape. In order to recover something meaningful from the Secondary World and incorporate it into the Primary World, a reader must first escape as fully as possible into the Secondary. Tolkien points out that “Though fairy-stories are of course by no means the only medium of Escape, they are today one of the most obvious and (to some) outrageous.” The “obvious” and “outrageous” escape of fantasy can be very compelling if the Secondary world is well-constructed and the author’s story captivating. Readers can escape into a story when they forget, for a short time, their own lives and worries and immerse themselves

in those of others. The immersion can be most intense in fairy-stories because readers escape into a world so unlike the Primary World. Tolkien compares this escape to that of a man in prison: "Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls?" Our own world is like the prison, and our fairy stories the other topics about which we choose to think. This escape can relax us because we leave our stress and problems behind.

Escaping into a horror story is like escaping into any other fantasy world. The horrific elements grip us and compel us to read on as circumstances become grimmer. Escaping into a scary world has appeal for multiple reasons. Tolkien acknowledges that "there are other and more profound 'escapisms' that have always appeared in fairy-tale and legend." Seeing the things in horror stories that are more grim and terrible than our own troubles is part of their appeal. Apart from this, there is also the natural human fascination with the macabre, which will be discussed later at length.

Finally, Tolkien calls for all fairy-stories to include "consolation." Regarding this element, the horror story and Tolkien's ideal fairy-story differ drastically. Tolkien believes joy must be included in the fairy-tale for it to be truly satisfactory, saying "Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have [a happy ending]." Traditionally, horror stories do not have a "happily ever after" resolution. Horror stories end in tragedy and destruction. Most readers gain joy not from the outcome of horror stories, but from the fascination with the story. Horror can end with catastrophe, the opposite of what Tolkien expects from a fantasy

tale. He calls for a “eucatastrophe” or an unexpected event of extreme joy: “The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.”

Horror stories will not often meet this criterion. Although the conclusion of a horror novel may not be “eucatastrophic,” however, there is always hope that a character learned something from the story that will encourage her to prevent more evil in the future. Characters learning from the terrible events of a horror story can be the silver-lining to its dark skies. Apart from truly gruesome “slasher” horror, for example, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, there are often characters who survive the evil events to tell the story. In Stephen King novels, characters like Susan Snell from *Carrie* and Ben Mears from *Salem’s Lot* are the shaken survivors who have learned from the horror they have experienced.

Tolkien, although a true master of fantasy, is not its only authority. Many other authors have discussed fantasy stories and attempted to determine what characteristics best combine to make fantasy. In a 2013 interview with Laurie Penny, author Neil Gaiman discussed the importance of fantasy novels and escape literature. One of his most famous works, *Coraline*, is a fantasy/horror novella for children. He explained the significance of fantasy stories in this way:

Beautiful, poised, adult young women... tell me that *Coraline* saved their lives, got them through late childhood. This was their book that they held on to. It taught them about bravery. Sometimes they would tell me about how it got them through times of abuse. And this stuff actually is big and important. To give people tools. Mind tools that they can use to deal with real problems.

Many of Gaiman's works, graphic novels included, are horror stories. *The Graveyard Book*, one of the best-selling children's books of 2009, won the Newbery Medal for "outstanding contribution to children's literature" (Rich). *The Graveyard Book* is the story of a boy raised by spirits in a graveyard after his family is murdered. Gaiman's stories offer people "mind tools" and hope to deal with their problems. His brand of horror and fantasy is a significant contribution to both genres, and proves that not all fantasy stories must include unspeakable joy, that which brings tears to a reader's eyes.

Fantasy novels attract thousands of readers because of the same attributes Tolkien said they must have to be considered fantasy. The faerie, escape, recovery, and consolation of fairy tales make them wonderful and compelling. They allow our caged minds to fly to lands with endless possibilities, they make us rethink our lives, and they give us joy. Horror novels, as part of the fantasy genre, compel us for the same reasons. Instead of joy being part of the story, however, we receive pleasure from our fascination with the horrific circumstances of the stories.

People have been fascinated by horror stories for centuries. H.P. Lovecraft, a "master of horror," described it best when he wrote in his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," "As may naturally be expected of a form so closely connected with primal emotion, the horror-tale is as old as human thought and speech themselves." Examples of old horror stories are abundant. Ancient mythology was full of horrifying scenes. Prometheus, for instance, was punished for stealing fire from the gods by being bound to a rock for all eternity, having his insides eaten by vultures. Dante's *Inferno* described, in hideous detail, the horrors that await

sinner in hell. Even the works of Shakespeare included supernatural beings. *Hamlet* is a story that begins with a ghost, and in *King Lear* audiences watch horrified as Gloucester's eyes are gouged out. Edgar Allan Poe's dark tales are still popular for their haunting subject matter and prose. The list of famous works that include supernatural horror goes on and on.

Today people seem more interested in horror than ever. Horror films draw huge audiences, and popular television shows capitalize on the current fascination with horror. Being drawn to scary stories is a characteristic many people share. Although we may not like to experience fright in our day-to-day lives, we are curious about the horrors that could exist. Audiences like experiencing brief fright in a controlled environment – in a dark theater for two hours, on a television screen once a week, or in a book they can pick up and put down. Joe Hill discusses the appeal of horror in his article "Peering Into the Darkness." According to Hill, "The compulsion to peer into the darkness, and wonder about what's there, is a distinctly useful and adaptive trait. And as it happens, the fiction of the horrific is unusually well tuned to address the most frightening and fascinating unknowns." These "frightening and fascinating" unknowns are the worst-case scenarios we allow ourselves to consider only briefly outside the context of fiction. We might wonder what would happen if we drove off the road and were disfigured in a horrible accident. We could think for a moment about how frightened we would be if all the bodies in a cemetery were reanimated and came for our brains. These fleeting thoughts are brought to life on the screen or page by artists who allow us to truly relish the horror story.

Psychologically, there are several reasons why people may experience pleasure from violent or horrific images. Glenn and Cheri Sparks, in their article "Violence, Mayhem, and

Horror,” discuss the psychological appeal of horror: “In the case of horror, individuals may specifically seek the thrill and excitement that horrific images evoke or they may be drawn in by the aesthetic appeal of scenes involving bizarre monsters” (75). Horror also offers a deviation from the norm, appealing to the curiosity of the audience. Sparks and Sparks note how certain scenes in horror movies violate social norms. This deviation entertains audiences because it differs from the monotony they see in their everyday lives. Also, by violating these norms, horror stories could appeal to the audience’s secret desire to violate social norms themselves or have them violated by someone else (79).

H.P. Lovecraft also addressed the appeal of macabre stories in “Supernatural Horror in Literature.” Lovecraft begins by explaining that fear stems from the unknown.

Because we remember pain and the menace of death more vividly than pleasure, and because our feelings toward the beneficent aspects of the unknown have from the first been captured and formalised by conventional religious rituals, it has fallen to the lot of the darker and more maleficent side of cosmic mystery to figure chiefly in our popular supernatural folklore.

Lovecraft believed that humans recall evil things more often than pleasurable things. Joyous things can be fleeting and the emotions associated with happiness can easily be forgotten. Something that is particularly frightening, however, can haunt us for a longer time and has the potential to make the best and most striking stories. Lovecraft states, “This tendency, too, is naturally enhanced by the fact that uncertainty and danger are always closely allied; thus making any kind of an unknown world a world of peril and evil possibilities.” Essentially,

because we know that evil and horror are extreme and boundless, worlds of horror have infinite potential to fascinate us. The link between uncertainty, evil, and peril make horror stories appealing because, from early on in a story, characters find themselves in perilous situations that only continue to worsen. Scary stories, with their dark tone and thrills at every turn, become even more fascinating. The thrill of fear does not grow old or lessen with age, but can become even sharper in our minds. Lovecraft wrote, "When to this sense of fear and evil the inevitable fascination of wonder and curiosity is superadded, there is born a composite body of keen emotion and imaginative provocation whose vitality must of necessity endure as long as the human race itself." The "fascination of wonder and curiosity" which he said must be added to the "sense of fear and evil" is the enchantment of faerie which Tolkien described. It is the magic of a great secondary world and a well-told story that will illuminate the evil in a way that is satisfying to readers.

The current popularity of dark television series, movies, and books demonstrates how important horror stories have become to our culture. *The Walking Dead*, a story about the survival of humans in a world that has experienced a zombie apocalypse, has gained a huge following since its premiere in 2010. *American Horror Story*, a television series that renews each season with a new plot and characters, consistently presents drama in a horror setting. Past seasons have included a coven of witches, an insane asylum, a haunted house, and a "freak show." These series are a novelty on network television and their appeal is undeniable as they continue to keep high ratings.

Horror movies have always been a popular subset of film. There are many types of horror movies that frighten us in different ways. Psychological horror attempts to scare us by a manipulation of our mind. Slasher or gory horror, such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, creates fear by sheer violence and mayhem. Other horror movies contain fully developed stories that include horrific elements. The best of these horror movies are, arguably, the movies based upon books. Movies based upon Stephen King novels have become a huge staple in popular culture. Stanley Kubrick's 1980 adaptation of *The Shining* is still viewed as one of the best horror films of all time. Jack Nicholson's portrayal of Jack Torrance was terrifying, iconic, and aided in making the movie memorable for generations. *Misery* captured viewers' attention with its striking, violent imagery and Kathy Bates' amazing portrayal of the bizarre Annie Wilkes. There have been three movie adaptations of *Carrie* since it was published in 1974, and it has also inspired a Broadway musical. King's stories are so rich that they have inspired over 35 movie adaptations to date, and will undoubtedly continue to inspire more (StephenKing.com). Scores of other horror movies based upon dark fantasies have achieved great success in Hollywood as well. Books such as Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* have gone on to captivate audiences as movies. The appeal of films like these can be traced back to what H.P. Lovecraft pointed out in his essay: horror stories have unlimited possibility to shock us, scare us, and keep us enthralled.

Finally, and most importantly, one of the richest ways we can explore horror is through books. The popularity of horror novels demonstrates our society's interest in scary stories. Several of the 100 best-selling books of all time are scary books (ranker.com). *Jaws*, *The Exorcist*, *The Lovely Bones*, and other popular novels with dark themes made the list. Beyond

being popular, horror stories are important to our culture in other ways. To assist audiences to cope with horrific events or situations in their lives, using the recovery and escape previously described, horror novels prove themselves an important subgenre of literature.

For adults, horror is a great and thrilling escape, but for children it can be even more important. Greg Ruth, an artist and comic author, argued for more horror books for children in his article “Why Horror is Good for You (And Even Better for Your Kids).” He writes, “Horror provides a playground in which kids can dance with their fears in a safe way that can teach them how to survive monsters and be powerful, too.” Giving children power is imperative to their development, as so much of their childhood is spent at the mercy of their caretakers. Horror books are popular for adults *and* for children because they allow us to escape and learn to cope. Scary stories can transcend age and background. Lovecraft knew this truth as well, commenting that

Children will always be afraid of the dark, and men with minds sensitive to hereditary impulse will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse.

Horror books are for anyone, and their cultural relevance continues to prevail.

Accepting that horror is an important part of fantasy literature, as well as socially and culturally significant, naturally leads into the discussion of one of horror’s most prolific authors, Stephen King. By examining King’s first three published works (*Carrie*, *Salem’s Lot*, and *The Shining*), we can gain a glimpse into how powerful he is as an author.

The dedication in *Carrie* reads “This is for Tabby, who got me into it – and then bailed me out of it.” *Carrie* was actually King’s fourth novel (he had already written *The Shining*, *Misery*, and *Salem’s Lot*), but the first to be published. He wrote the first three pages, the infamous shower scene, but thought they weren’t very good and threw them out. His wife, Tabitha, retrieved the pages from the garbage and encouraged him to finish the novel (*On Writing*, King, 76). *Carrie*, the story of a troubled teenage girl with unexplainable power, was something slightly different from the other three novels he had already written. Since it takes place in a high school, it had the potential to go in the wrong direction – it could have been too “teen” to be taken seriously. King’s initial lack of confidence in the story was understandable. Yet *Carrie* became anything but “teen” fiction, although the story deals with the harsh realities of being a teenager, including being an outsider.

The tone for the novel is set by the first scene, which King originally threw out. A teenage girl, Carrietta “Carrie” White, is in the locker room changing for gym class when she begins to menstruate for the first time. Ignorant of the process of menstruation, she believes she is bleeding to death. She panics and, once the other girls in the locker room become aware of Carrie’s situation, they taunt her and throw tampons and sanitary napkins at her. Carrie is humiliated and we get a glimpse into her mind for the first time. She is hurt, enraged, but not astonished at the treatment. She has been ostracized her whole life due to her mother’s fanatical Christian values that have forced Carrie to dress and act differently from the other girls at her school.

Carrie imagines throughout the novel what it would be like to get revenge on all the other students in her class. The constant hate and taunting she receives make her anger towards the other students understandable, almost justifiable. King's portrayal of bullying is difficult to read due to its gripping reality. The students hate Carrie because she is different, but even the teachers don't care for her much. She is an annoyance they wish they could ignore. Carrie's home life is no reprieve from the hate she experiences at school. Her mother's strict religious values dominate her life. Carrie's mother, Margaret White, often locks Carrie in a closet for hours, making her beg forgiveness for any perceived sins, forcing Carrie to go long hours without food or access to a bathroom. Carrie lives in a world where she has no one she can trust, and she receives no positive attention or kindness.

What makes Carrie special is an ability she has had since she was young that terrifies her mother. Carrie can move things with her mind. She rediscovers the ability she had all but forgotten shortly after the shower incident, and she begins to practice. As her power and rage grow, readers anticipate that her story will ultimately end in some kind of tragedy due to the way King wrote the story. The novel is written in epistolary style, compiling not only narrative from Carrie's point of view, but newspaper-clippings, legal testimonies, and narrative from the point of view of other characters in the story. From the beginning of the story, we know that Carrie's hometown and high school have experienced a tragedy of epic proportions.

Readers learn from the clippings they are reading that whatever tragedy created all the mayhem happened at the prom. Knowing something terrible *will* happen, but not knowing exactly what will occur, gives the readers a feeling of dread for most of the story. The dread

builds as Carrie begins to be accepted by her peers and embrace her powers, because readers know Carrie's happiness can only be short-lived. "[Carrie] was intimidated but not stopped. Because, if she wanted to, she could send them all screaming into the streets. [...] Like Samson in the temple, she could rain destruction on their heads if she so desired" (*Carrie*, King, 107). Susan Snell, a classmate who had participated in mocking Carrie in the shower, chooses to try to make amends for her behavior by helping Carrie have a positive experience at the prom. She offers up her own date, Tommy, to Carrie. Carrie is excited to finally be part of something with her peers.

When things go bad, they go very bad. Chris Hargensen, one of Carrie's most merciless tormentors, conspires with her sadistic boyfriend, Billy, to ruin Carrie's prom. Their plan, first to rig the votes so Carrie wins the title of Prom Queen and then to cover her and Tommy in pig's blood on stage during the crowning, is gruesome and cruel. All of the bullying and abuse Carrie experiences is tragic, and seeing her begin to harness her supernatural telekinetic abilities is unnerving, but the beginning of Chris and Billy's plan is the first time we see what might be described as "real horror" in *Carrie*. King describes Billy and his friends going to a farm and slaughtering the pigs, and focuses on the morbid joy that Billy receives while killing the pigs and knowing their blood will be used to torment a classmate. Chris and Billy's motto, "Pig blood for a pig," allows readers to become aware of the exact form of trouble that awaits Carrie (*Carrie*, King, 136). Readers are also aware that Carrie has the power to fight back in a devastating way with her telekinesis, a talent she has kept secret from everyone except her mother.

The prom scene and its aftermath are pure horror and mayhem. The pig's blood falls on Carrie, and the bucket immediately strikes Tommy on his head, killing him. The rest of the students, unaware that Tommy has died, are at a loss for how to react. They laugh, and the laughter sends Carrie into a bitter rage: "They were laughing at her again. And suddenly it broke. The horrible realization of how badly she had been cheated came over her, and a horrible, soundless cry tried to come out of her" (*Carrie*, King, 217). She feels that every bit of happiness and acceptance she had before the prom had been a cheat, and her peers had only planned to torment her as they always had. Her rage and embarrassment give her the motivation and adrenaline to exercise her power to its full extent. She bars the doors of the auditorium with her mind and pulls down electrical wires onto the already wet floor, electrocuting multiple students. She starts a fire and flees, leaving most of her classmates trapped inside the gym. Barrels of oil are stored in the high school, and once they catch fire the entire building explodes.

Killing most of her high school class is not enough for Carrie. She continues through town, destroying fire hydrants, gas stations, and more electrical wires. She heads for home where her mother is waiting. While Carrie is crying, trying to explain how she was horribly tricked by her peers, her mother stabs her, hoping to kill her and the "demonic" spirit inside her. Carrie uses her power to stop her mother's heart and then leaves the house, bleeding severely from the stab wound. She encounters Chris and Billy and forces their car off the road, killing them both. Susan Snell, hearing the commotion outside, sets out to find Carrie. After she does, Carrie succumbs to her injury, and the bleeding Carrie dies in Susan's arms.

Many of the deaths in *Carrie* seem senseless. She kills most of her graduating class and multiple townspeople who were in the wrong place at the wrong moment. However, to Carrie, the destruction was all deserved. She had been bullied and neglected her entire life, and no one had ever stepped in. Through the epistolary style, King reveals that neighbors knew Margaret White was mistreating her daughter, but had never reported it. Students remember Carrie being teased all the way back to elementary school. They were all guilty bystanders in Carrie's torment even if they never actively participated. In the novel, Susan Snell tries to explain this phenomenon and defend Carrie even after her death. Because Carrie was never truly the monster; it was her tormentors that led to her release of her powers. "[Carrie] is the girl they keep calling a monster. I want you to keep that firmly in mind. The girl who could be satisfied with a hamburger and a dime root beer after her only school dance so her momma wouldn't be worried" (*Carrie*, King, 170).

This story, compelling and horrifying, also teaches a powerful lesson about bullying. Carrie's story could have ended differently if she had ever experienced support or affection. We also see that some of the students who participated in tormenting Carrie, like Chris, had their own insecurities they were trying to deal with. *Carrie* gives a visual representation of the damage done by bullying. Often, bullying just leaves psychological scars on the victim, but in *Carrie* the torment ends in actually destroying the town.

The book also provides powerful protagonists and antagonists, almost all of them women. Although readers may feel that the women in the story represent extremes, they all have complex emotions. Margaret could be seen as overly controlling, Chris as too "bitchy,"

Carrie as overly emotional, and Susan Snell as the stereotypical “girl next door.” These women are easily connected to stereotypes of women because of their actions, and King has received criticism for his portrayal of the women in *Carrie*. These women all have their own motivation, however, for acting the way they do, making them much more than cookie-cutter female stereotypes. Margaret was raped and the rape produced Carrie, constantly haunting Margaret and connecting Carrie with sin. Chris has a seemingly charmed and spoiled life, but had to act out to receive any kind of attention, positive or negative, from her parents. Carrie is bullied and abused which leads to her own psychological break. Susan constantly dreads her future, worried she will wind up as an average housewife. By the night of the prom, Susan has rebelled against the idea and intends to leave Tommy to pursue her own dreams. Margaret and Chris powerfully manipulate and emotionally control others throughout the novel. Carrie, initially the victim, ultimately shows the most power through her massive destruction. These portrayals of dominant women make the novel more than simply a horror novel. It is a well-developed novel that includes elements of horror, both fascinating us like any good novel and scaring us in a way only horror can. Joshua Rothman sums up *Carrie*’s appeal best in his 2013 article for the New Yorker titled “What Stephen King Isn’t” by saying, “*Carrie*, the novel, is good because it’s a well-observed story about adolescent cruelty and rage. But it’s great because it imagines a freaky, unhinged, and extraordinary situation.”

Following his powerful debut with *Carrie*, Stephen King published ‘*Salem’s Lot*, a story about vampires in a rural town in Maine. ‘*Salem’s Lot* (the slang term for Jerusalem’s Lot, the name of the town) is a much more conventional horror story than *Carrie*. King was inspired by Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*: “One night over supper I wondered aloud what would happen if Dracula

came back in the twentieth century, to America” (StephenKing.com). *‘Salem’s Lot* follows moderately successful writer Ben Mears as he returns to his childhood home of Jerusalem’s Lot, Maine. As a child, Ben had had a terrifying experience in the Marsten house on a hill, rumored to be haunted. He is returning in an attempt to face his old fears and write a novel about the house. Upon returning home, he begins dating a young woman named Susan Norton and makes friends with several prominent townspeople.

A strange figure named Kurt Barlow enters the town and purchases the Marsten house, piquing Ben’s curiosity. Around the same time, a young boy dies and his brother disappears, casting a grim shadow over the town. The lost boy, Ralphie Glick, has been bitten by a vampire and begins infecting other townspeople at night, creating an epidemic that takes over the town. Ben and several other residents of the town become aware of the vampires and try to fight them using conventional means – holy water, crucifixes, and wooden stakes through the heart. Susan, however, is captured and turned, leading Ben to attempt to free her from her undead, cursed life by driving a stake through her heart. Ben begins to accept that “all around them, the bestiality of the night rises on tenebrous wings... [t]he vampire’s time has come” (*‘Salem’s Lot*, King, 363).

The few remaining townspeople who evade infection, including a young boy named Mark Petrie, have a final showdown with the leader of the vampires, Kurt Barlow. During the battle, several of the townspeople meet extremely gruesome ends. The priest, Father Callahan, is forced by Barlow to drink tainted blood. Although not infected himself, the priest is damned and unable to enter a church ever again. Jim Cody, a local man, falls down the stairs in the

boarding house Mears once lived in and impales himself upon several knives, dying immediately. These scenes provide the true scares that have become part of King's brand. The characters are well-developed and sympathetic. By the end of the novel, readers have seen enough characters succumb to a vampire's bite that they hold onto hope that the few humans left will survive. King describes the horrors of their deaths so vividly that the defeat the readers feel deepens the way they experience the peril of the surviving characters.

After these crushing losses, Ben and Mark finally face Barlow. "Ben thought quite easily: I'm going to my death. The Thought came naturally, and there was no fear or regret in it. Inward-turning emotions were lost under the overwhelming atmosphere of evil that hung over this place" (*Salem's Lot*, King, 427). Despite his concern, Ben and Mark are able to end Barlow with a stake to the heart as he lay in his coffin. The other infected townspeople prove to be too numerous for the boys to fight single-handedly, and they flee Jerusalem's Lot. The prologue of the novel is a flash-forward to Mark and Ben's lives after the horrors they experienced in Maine. They have taken up residence in a seaside town in Mexico, and Mark enters the church as Ben continually searches for news of Jerusalem's Lot. At the end of the book, Mark and Ben decide it is time to return to the lot and attempt to end the evil of the vampires once and for all.

The story, which could have been a very one-dimensional retelling of *Dracula*, is filled with rich characters with complex emotions. There are healthy doses of thrills and scares throughout the novel along with fast-paced action. Initially, readers glance into Ben's memories of the old Marsten house as he knew it as a child. He entered the house on a dare and

discovered the house's namesake, Hubert Marsten, hanging by a noose from the ceiling. Next, King draws attention to the horrors that currently exist in 'Salem's Lot with the attack on the two young boys. As Ben conducts investigations into the strange happenings of the town, readers view attack after attack. Some of these attacks are dark and terrifying while some are heart-breaking, such as the mother of the two lost boys experiencing such joy at finding her son, Ralphie, again that she doesn't even realize he is biting her and taking her life.

King skillfully demonstrates the art of telling supernatural horror stories with '*Salem's Lot*. Although the vampires are a type of monster found only in the realm of fantasy, Jerusalem's Lot has many elements of a real town. The characters and their relationships make the novel, although fantasy, feel like a real human experience. Ben Mears is a reluctant hero, resorting to vampire folklore to try to save his childhood home from monsters he never believed could have existed. While he cannot quite come to terms with the idea of vampires in Maine, Ben does what he must to protect himself and Mark, a resourceful young boy. Ben creates a necessary and deep connection with Mark, and this relationship resembles that of an adoptive father and son. Father Callahan serves as a spiritual guide along their journey, at the end sacrificing his soul to stop the evil. Reading '*Salem's Lot* is a journey that takes unexpected turns, and demonstrates King's ability to make even the oldest stories new and relevant.

Two years following the publication of '*Salem's Lot* in 1975, Stephen King published the work that established him as an important author in the horror genre. Most people picture the 1980 Kubrick film based upon King's novel when they think of *The Shining*, due to the film's continued status as one of the best and most popular horror films of all time. The story,

however, is best told on the page, according to King. In the author's note of his 2013 sequel to *The Shining*, *Doctor Sleep*, he wrote this:

There was Stanley Kubrick's movie, which many seem to remember – for reasons I have never quite understood – as one of the scariest films they have ever seen. (If you have seen the movie but not read the novel, you should note that *Doctor Sleep* follows the latter, which is, in my opinion, the True History of the Torrance Family.)

The Shining is a story about family. Jack Torrance is a man with many demons, including a bad temper and alcoholism. His wife, Wendy, tries to believe that her marriage is worth all the pain Jack puts her through, including emotional abuse, tantrums, and infidelity. They have one young son, Danny, and at only five years old he is very perceptive. One evening, while searching through his dad's office, Danny disturbs Jack's things and causes Jack to break Danny's arm in a fit of uncontrollable anger. This event, along with an outburst of anger at work that caused him to lose his teaching job, makes Jack determined to change his ways. He attempts "white knuckle" sobriety and takes a position as a winter caretaker at a hotel in the mountains of Colorado called The Overlook.

King describes The Overlook as a place of mystery and evil. Even before readers experience any particular hauntings, the hotel is a very imposing figure in the story. "Flakes of snow swirled and danced across the porch. The Overlook faced it as it had for nearly three-quarters of a century, its darkened windows now bearded with snow, indifferent to the fact it was now cut off from the world..." (*The Shining*, King, 210). Before the Torrance family is snowed in for the winter, they learn that a previous caretaker went mad in the hotel during the

winter and killed his children and his wife, foreshadowing the horror to come. Danny also befriends the chef at the hotel, Dick Hallorann, and gains insight into his own power.

Like Carrie White, Daniel Torrance is a child with a gift. He has always been able to sense things with his set of telepathic abilities. Dick Hallorann identifies this gift as “the shining,” which is an ability he shares. The two realize they can communicate telepathically, and Dick explains to Danny how the gift is something other people will not understand. Through these conversations with Dick, Danny is warned that The Overlook has spirits of guests and employees that have passed while at The Overlook, and Danny is to avoid them, particularly those in room 217.

After Dick leaves the family and as snow overtakes the hotel, locking them in, the spirits in the hotel grow more powerful. Danny senses that the hotel is its own entity, evil and bent on controlling and manipulating its occupants.

Jack and Wendy Torrance do not share their son’s gift, or, at least, not to the same extent. Although they both have uneasy feelings about staying in the hotel all winter, they don’t understand how sinister their surroundings are. Jack is weak from his alcohol cravings and anger. He feels like a failure as a teacher, a father, and an aspiring writer. The hotel preys upon his weaknesses, stocking the previously empty bar with liquor and releasing the spirit of a bartender, Lloyd, to encourage Jack to drink and, ultimately, kill his wife and son.

As Jack is slowly going mad, Danny is having his own troubles in the hotel. Despite Dick’s warnings, he investigates room 217. He discovers Mrs. Massey, the ghost of a woman who overdosed years earlier in the bathtub. He also keeps seeing visions of “REDRUM,” a cryptic

message from his imaginary friend, Tony. Danny begins to realize that the hotel traps evil and magnifies it. He is often afraid, but always with a child's innocence. He loves his father very much and wants to believe that the job, and the winter, will make him happier.

Danny eventually realizes that staying in the hotel was a mistake, and that his father is no longer the same man. Once Jack is fully possessed by the evil in the hotel, he sets out to kill Wendy and Danny. Danny and Wendy must fight their way out of the hotel, even with all of its evil forces working against them. Danny discovers "REDRUM" is the reflection of the word "MURDER," and all along Tony was attempting to warn him of his father's potential murderous rage. He sends a telepathic cry to Dick, asking him to come back to the hotel to help them.

Dick does return and is maimed by the topiary animals surrounding the hotel that come to life. Danny and Wendy flee the hotel, with Jack following closely behind. Jack is able to come out of his trance for only a few moments and manages to tell Danny he loves him, and that he should run. The boiler in the hotel begins to overheat, and Jack is possessed again by the hotel. He uses a mallet to destroy his face, making his features unrecognizable. He returns to the hotel in an attempt to relieve the boiler pressure, but before he can it explodes. The Overlook is destroyed and Jack dies. Danny, Wendy, and Dick escape. All are traumatized by their experiences, and Danny left to mourn his father. Dick leaves Danny with these words, "Good people die in bad, painful ways and leave folks that love them all alone. Sometimes it seems like it's only the bad people who stay healthy and prosper. The world don't love you, but your momma does and so do I" (*The Shining*, King, 446).

The Shining is a story that is unique and undeniably enthralling. Although the novel starts slowly as King develops Jack's backstory and establishes Danny's personality, once the family is locked into The Overlook the scares seem to come with every turn of the page. Not only is the isolation of the family eerie, but the hotel is full of its own creepy characters. Making the hotel an evil being gives the story a unique villain, and Danny as a five-year-old hero is refreshing. He is as intelligent as an adult but has the innocence of a child.

At the core of the story, Stephen King is dissecting complicated family dynamics. A man with a wife and son, Jack never really learned how to take care of his own issues before he took on familial responsibilities. Wendy is a woman who doesn't know how to come to terms with the fact that the man she married is no longer the same person. Danny loves his father, and looks past all the mistakes he has made. The family pressures are part of the psychological strain on Jack's mind that helps The Overlook corrupt him. Dick Hallorann, a man who is able to interact with Danny for only a short time, acts more like a father to him than Jack. The two share the shining, which is a bond that proves more powerful than blood. Although Jack regains clarity for a brief moment to tell Danny he loves him one final time before his death, his demons ultimately overtake him. Jack's intentions towards Danny are always better than his actions. *The Shining* demonstrates how complex love can be within a family. In the extreme circumstances of The Overlook, King portrays how easily humans can fall to their own vices and lose their way with traumatic repercussions. Just as *Carrie* was a cautionary tale about the negative outcomes of bullying, *The Shining* examines themes such as excessive anger, alcoholism, and parental responsibility.

Stephen King waited decades to release a sequel to *The Shining*. The novel and movie had become staples in pop culture, and a sequel always has the potential to disappoint loyal fans. Yet in 2013 King came back with a new story from the same alternate universe as *The Shining*. It follows Dan Torrance as an adult, still dealing with the effects of the trauma he experienced in The Overlook hotel. He inherited alcoholism from his father, along with recreational drug use and a temper. Dan's story with substance abuse takes a different turn than his father's, however, and instead of pursuing "white-knuckle" sobriety, he attends Alcoholic Anonymous. He also finds a way to put his gift to use in hospice facilities. He uses his connection with death to help dying individuals pass into the afterlife as smoothly as possible, earning him the nickname "Dr. Sleep." He seems to have cleaned up his life pretty well until he begins to make a connection with a young girl with the shining named Abra, much as Dick had connected with him as a child.

Abra has the misfortune of discovering a cult of child-killers called the True Knot. They are semi-immortal beings who prey upon the essence of children who have the shining. The story focuses on Dan and Abra hunting down the True Knot and ending their centuries-long streak of silent terror in the United States.

Doctor Sleep is an exceptional story in its own right, drawing upon plot elements from *The Shining* but not depending upon them. It continues to explore the theme of substance abuse, but in a more hopeful light. Abra, an amazingly talented girl, occasionally mirrors Carrie White with her abilities and temper. The story of a man and a child banding together to destroy evil echoes Mark Petrie and Ben Mears in *'Salem's Lot*. *Doctor Sleep* combines the best of all of

King's tricks, and he delivered a gripping story that stayed on the New York Times bestseller list for twenty one weeks (nytimes.com). The continued appeal of King's works shows how his stories evolve over time and how he is able to adapt to new generations of readers.

Stephen King has gained a loyal band of followers, many of whom will read any project with his name attached. He has earned this following, though, not on "pop-fiction" and cheap scares, but with interesting human stories. His novels showcase some of the best characteristics horror/fantasy novels have to offer: complex heroes, unique villains, and dark humor. Expressing the "human condition" often leads to dark places. King isn't afraid to point directly at the seedy side of humanity, magnifying with supernatural elements the real scares in our own world. The world already fears kidnappers, but in *Doctor Sleep*, we fear the effortless way the True Knot preys upon children. We all fear bullies, but *Carrie* makes us fear those who are bullied as well. The unknown is terrifying, especially in the form of a haunted house upon a hill with a vampire as a resident as in *'Salem's Lot*. Fearing ourselves, our own demons, makes Jack Torrance of *The Shining* someone we can relate to. King, above all, knows how to tell us a good story.

The stories Stephen King writes capture elements of fantasy that Tolkien desired for fairy tales, and also gives people the "mind tools" that Neil Gaiman identified as so important to the development of young people. King's success as an author is a mixed blessing, for the more novels he sells the more "mainstream" his stories become. It is difficult for some scholars to accept that great literature can have mass appeal or feature a demented teenager on prom night. At the core of King's works, though, he is telling fantasy stories and adding to them the

horrific elements. He creates in his works “world[s] of peril and evil possibilities” that Lovecraft knew so fascinated humanity.

Therefore, I will always regard Mr. Stephen King as the contemporary “master of horror,” a title I believe he has earned in the forty years since he published *Carrie*. Horror, such an important part of the fantasy genre, is fortunate to have such a master, and I am fortunate to appreciate this era of Stephen King. His novels offer a glorious escape from reality that I find necessary for my mental well-being. His numerous works offer me many more unexplored worlds and characters to discover yet. I am confident that the more I read, the more I will marvel at his amazing secondary worlds, quirky characters, and perilous situations.

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